

# What Works Clearinghouse



## Character Education

Revised September 8, 2006

## Lessons in Character

**Program description** *Lessons in Character* is designed to promote elementary and middle school students' knowledge about core character education values and, through that knowledge, shape children's positive behaviors and support academic success. It consists of 24 lessons organized around weekly themes, taught through

stories, writing activities, and class projects. Teachers introduce the theme with a story that shows a value in action; students then engage that topic with a variety of activities. The program also includes daily oral language development and weekly writing assignments, optional parts of the program's implementation.

**Research** One study of *Lessons in Character* met the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) evidence standards, and a second study met WWC standards with reservations. The two studies included a total of more than 400 students from fourth and fifth grades

attending schools in three southern states. The studies examined results on students' behavior; knowledge, attitudes, and values; and academic achievement.<sup>1</sup>

**Effectiveness** *Lessons in Character* was found to have potentially positive effects on academic achievement. It had no discernible effect on behavior or on knowledge, attitudes, and values.

	Behavior	Knowledge, attitudes, and values	Academic achievement
<b>Rating of effectiveness</b>	No discernible effects	No discernible effects	Potentially positive effects
<b>Improvement index<sup>2</sup></b>	Average: +8 percentile points Range: +8 percentile points	Average: +6 percentile points, Range: +4 to +12 percentile points	Average: +16 percentile points Range: +12 to +18 percentile points

1. The evidence presented in this report is based on the available research. Findings and conclusions may change as new research becomes available.

2. These numbers show the average and the range of improvement indices for all readings across the two studies.

## Additional program information

### Developer and contact

*Lessons in Character* was developed by Dr. David Brooks. Distribution is through Young People's Press, 3033 5th Avenue, Suite 200, San Diego, CA 92103. Web: [www.youngpeoplespress.com](http://www.youngpeoplespress.com). Email: [info@youngpeoplespress.com](mailto:info@youngpeoplespress.com). Telephone: 800-231-9774 (M–F, 8–5 PST).

### Scope of use

Information is not available on the scope of use. *Lessons in Character* may have changed since the studies were conducted. The WWC recommends asking the developer for information about the most current version of this curriculum and taking into account that student demographics and school context may affect outcomes.

### Teaching

The core curriculum for *Lessons in Character* consists of 24 lessons at each grade level. A “theme of the week” approach is used with stories, activities, daily and weekly writing assignments, and a class project. Teachers introduce the week's concept, read stories portraying that value in action, and engage students in targeted activities. Materials for students are available in English or Spanish.

The developer provides teaching resources such as binders with strategies, skills, suggestions, and techniques for teaching *Lessons in Character*. The teacher's guide provides the lesson's main idea, concrete objectives, and teaching strategies, and suggests that class projects center on the lessons' main ideas. Supplemental curriculum materials are also available for teachers to use in daily oral language development and weekly writing assignments. The materials are designed to enhance students' understanding of that week's core concept. Teachers are encouraged to attend a training workshop held by the developer, study author, or school staff trained by the developer. Training workshops may vary from half a day to two full days.

### Cost

The costs of materials for a classroom—including books, teacher's edition, black line masters, posters, and so forth—range from about \$195 to \$370 depending on the grade level. An administrator's package is available for \$139. According to the developer, the cost of a training workshop is \$500 per day and may be individually negotiated based on the amount of materials purchased.

## Research

Two studies reviewed by the WWC investigated the effects of *Lessons in Character*. One study (Dietsch, Bayha, & Zheng, 2005) was a randomized controlled trial that met WWC evidence standards. The other study (DeVargas, 1998) was a quasi-experimental design that met WWC evidence standards with reservations.

The Dietsch, Bahya, and Zheng study included 372 fourth-grade students from eight schools in Louisiana and Florida.

It compared outcomes for students in 11 randomly assigned classrooms using the curriculum against the outcomes for students that did not use the curriculum in 10 control classrooms in the same schools. The DeVargas study included 61 fifth-grade students drawn from nine schools using the curriculum and six comparison schools in Fort Worth, Texas. The two studies focused on *Lessons in Character* as implemented in classrooms rather than as a schoolwide intervention.

## Effectiveness Findings

The WWC review of character education addresses student outcomes in three domains: behavior; knowledge, attitudes, and values; and academic achievement.

*Behavior.* The Dietsch, Bayha, & Zheng study reported no differences in effects on citizenship grades.

*Knowledge, attitudes, and values.* In the Dietsch, Bayha, & Zheng study students using *Lessons in Character* gave more positive responses to some of the items (such as do not pick on other students, show good sportsmanship) in four scales of character-related attitudes and values. The average response across each of these four scales was neither statistically significant (as calculated by the WWC) nor large enough to be substantively important using WWC criteria.<sup>3</sup>

The DeVargas study reported neither statistically significant nor substantively important differences between the *Lessons in Character* group and the comparison groups on a measure of moral development.

*Academic achievement.* The Dietsch, Bayha, & Zheng study reported statistically significant differences favoring the *Lessons in Character* group on academic achievement (reading and math) and attendance (absences). Two of these outcomes (math and attendance) were found to be statistically significant (as calculated by the WWC).<sup>3</sup>

### Rating of effectiveness

The WWC rates interventions as positive, potentially positive, mixed, no discernible effects, potentially negative, or negative. The rating of effectiveness takes into account four factors: the quality of the research design, the statistical significance of the findings (as calculated by the WWC), the size of the difference between participants in the intervention condition and the comparison conditions, and the consistency in findings across studies (see the [WWC Intervention Rating Scheme](#)).

**The WWC found *Lessons in Character* to have potentially positive effects on academic achievement, and no discernible effects on behavior or on knowledge, attitudes, and values**

### Improvement index

For each outcome domain, the WWC computed an improvement index based on the average effect size (see the [WWC Improvement Index Technical Paper](#)). This improvement index represents the difference between the percentile rank of the average student in the intervention condition versus the percentile rank of the average student in the comparison condition. Unlike the rating of effectiveness, the improvement index is entirely based on the size of the effect, regardless of the statistical significance of the effect, the study design, or the analysis. The improvement index can take on values between -50 and +50, with positive numbers denoting favorable results. The average improvement index for behavior is +8 (Dietsch, Bayha, & Zheng, 2005). The average improvement index for knowledge, attitudes, and values in the two studies that WWC reviewed is +6 percentile points,

with a range of +4 to +12 percentile points across findings. The average improvement index for academic achievement is +16 percentile points, with a range of +12 to +18 percentile points (Dietsch, Bayha, & Zheng, 2005).

### Summary

The WWC reviewed two studies on *Lessons in Character*. These studies found no discernible effects in behavior or in knowledge, attitudes, and values although the improvement index favored *Lessons in Character* in both cases. One study reported statistically significant effects on academic achievement, which generated a rating of potentially positive effects. Character education, an evolving field, is beginning to establish a research base. The evidence presented in this report is limited and may change as new research emerges.

3. The level of statistical significance was calculated by the WWC and corrects for clustering within classrooms or schools, and for multiple comparisons. For an explanation see the [WWC Tutorial on Mismatch](#). See the [WWC Intervention Rating Scheme](#) for the formulas the WWC used to calculate statistical significance.

## References **Met WWC evidence standards**

Dietsch, B., Bayha, J. L., & Zheng, H. (2005, April). *Short-term effects of a character education program among fourth grade students*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

### ***Additional citation***

Dietsch, B., & Bayha, J. L. (2005). *Short-term effects of a literature-based character education program among*

*fourth grade students: Report to the Young People's Press, Inc.* Los Alamitos, CA: WestEd.

## **Met WWC evidence standards with reservations**

DeVargas, R. C. (1998). A study of *Lessons in Character: The effect of moral development curriculum upon moral judgment*. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59 (11-A), 4042. (UMI No. 9913706)

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**For more information about specific studies and WWC calculations, please see the [WWC Lessons in Character Technical Appendices](#).**